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SUBJECT: TURKEY: LEADING COLUMNIST SCOLDS "SECULARIST
FOREIGN POLICY" FOR INFLEXIBLE RED LINES

Classified By: Ambassador James Jeffrey for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: In a too rare development, a key Turkish journalist spoke the truth about the inflexibility of Turkish foreign policy amid a feverish media commentary on the President's use of "Meds Yeghern" in our Armenian Remembrance Day message last week. "Sabah" columnist Mehmet Barlas called on Turkish politicians and diplomats to gain a little perspective. While he began by defending the GOT decision to take the politically sensitive steps necessary to normalize relations with Armenia, Barlas wound up with a round-robin critique of Turkey's secularist foreign policy institutions' traditional inflexibility and adherence to ossified policies on issues like as Cyprus and northern Iraq. Such stances, he argued, are much to Turkey's detriment. Barlas underscored that, in contrast, even the U.S. as the sole superpower reevaluates its positions periodically and offered a warning to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) not to fall into the same zero-sum trap as its predecessors. His fresh perspective comes at a time when the secularist opposition parties are increasingly turning to nationalistic (and often anti-American) rhetoric in an attempt to prevent the further erosion of their red lines. His analysis is a good reminder that despite the Erdogan public outbursts and AKP's coziness to the Hamasis and Hizbollahs of this world, there is much to appreciate in the Erdogan/Davutoglu/AKP "new approach" to foreign policy. End Summary.

No Change in Three Decades

12. (SBU) A recent column by mainstream "Sabah" newspaper's columnist Mehmet Barlas, a senior and well-respected journalist, provided a not-so-subtle criticism of the status quo foreign policy traditionally practiced by Turkey and a more indirect warning to the AKP government not to fall into the same trap. In the piece entitled "Firm Positions and Red Lines Challenge Turkey," Barlas accurately pointed out the intransigence of Turkey's traditional policies, noting that Turkish politicians and diplomats' position on Cyprus has not changed in nearly three decades. Meanwhile, the Greek Cypriots have managed to enter the EU and obtain the power to veto Turkey's EU accession bid. He also questioned maintaining a similarly hardened stance on northern Iraq and Armenia.

Traditional Foreign Policy Increasingly Out of Sync

13. (SBU) As Barlas noted, Turkey is facing a watershed

moment. Turkey's traditional foreign policy approach is out of sync with the changing global political geography and the role that Turkey is progressively carving out for itself in the region. Western-oriented secularist institutions, namely the MFA and Turkish General Staff (TGS), have dominated foreign policy for decades. Driven by Cold War realities and open hostilities with all its immediate neighbors, Turkey's world view heavily reflected zero-sum security concerns. The MFA and TGS had the luxury of developing a static, uncompromising approach as insulated bureaucracies free from political influence. Furthermore, the threat of a military coup prevented politicians from touching upon core secularist tenets.

14. (SBU) However, as the security environment changed and public support for military interference in politics waned, the Islamist-rooted, pro-reform AKP has assumed more latitude in addressing previously taboo topics, which it views as impeding progress in achieving its own agenda. Armenia is one example.

Even Americans Change, Why Can't We?

15. (SBU) Barlas concluded the piece by reminding his readers that not even the superpower U.S. can afford to be closed to change. He advised the foreign policy establishment to be more flexible and adapt to varying conditions and the facts of the world. Coming on the heels of the recent Turkey-Armenia joint statement, his column seems to reflect

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both frustration and hope towards the AKP's efforts to drag the secularist establishment into the 21st century.

Who Is Barlas?

16. (C) Barlas is an old and close friend of PM Erdogan, but it would be incorrect to characterize him as a pro-government columnist. His popular column reflects a generally liberal perspective, but one which is also flexible to the Islamist point of view when it fits his sensibilities. While he often defends AKP positions, he is also known to criticize the government openly. His balanced and practical viewpoint has won him a large fan base over the years. It is this very pragmatic approach which seems to have motivated this advisory to the government.

Comment

17. (C) Basically, our reaction to this is "amen." Barlas has outlined more effectively than an analytical embassy report (i.e., Turks read him) what is so wrong with traditional Turkish foreign policy. In fact, the President's message spurred another similar response from CNN Turk's top journalist. He warned that President Aliyev was setting the same trap Turks had suffered under for decades with the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" leader Denktas. Rather than solving their problems with their opponents or winning their own populations to new ways forward, they manipulate the notoriously nationalistic Turkish "motherland" public opinion into blocking Turkey's taking any initiative out of the respective morasses.

16. (C) The AKP's more pragmatic approach, however, is not without fault. It has replaced its predecessors' Western-oriented outlook with one defined by sometimes naive sympathy with the Muslim world and a desire to advance the business interests of its support base. The result has often meant a schizophrenic foreign policy. Reflecting its "zero problems with neighbors" approach, AKP leadership has engaged

Greece and the Caucasus ("good") as readily as it has reached out to pariah actors Iran, Hizbollah, and Hamas ("not so good"). As witnessed during the Gaza crisis and in the UNSC, the AKP at times seems close to replacing traditional Turkish red lines with its own nebulous red zones, namely the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa.

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Jeffrey